The selected correspondence of Michael Faraday

L. PEARCE WILLIAMS (Editor)
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Since Bence Jones's 'Life and letters' appeared a century ago no general addition to the body of Faraday's correspondence has been printed; yet the letters written to, and by, this extraordinary man are of great interest, not only for students of Faraday, but for the whole history of science in the nineteenth century, and that of electrical science in particular.

The present selection (it is not clear how many letters are omitted, apart from the previously printed Schönbein series) has been prepared by the author of an excellent biography of Faraday. The volumes are pleasant to read and well indexed, but the editing seems to have been hasty. For example, a letter assigned to the 7th January 1850 uses the word 'paramagnetic' and must therefore have been composed after August 1850, when William Whewell suggested the name to Faraday, and indeed after Faraday's use of 'paramagnetic' in print. The reader is left to seek the answer to many questions raised by these letters elsewhere; on the other hand, the many indefinite references to published scientific papers have been made specific, which is very useful. A great many letters are here published for the first time—a most valuable addition to the literature—including a large number owned by the IEE itself.

The letters relate to Faraday's private life, to his scientific discoveries and theories, to the business of the Royal Institution, and to the work which others were anxious to share with him. There is a little (not much) on Faraday as a professional consultant. He seems to have taken no interest in the development of telegraphy (though the discovery of the high capacitance of long wires, and of its effects, fascinated him), or of electrical machines. He was, however, very interested in the application of electrical illumination to lighthouses. The first volume contains material bearing on Faraday's discovery of electromagnetic induction; the second even more on his further discoveries of the experimental relation between light and magnetism, and of diamagnetism. We see, too, how close Faraday's relations were with Continental colleagues, not least the great Ampère, the chemists Dumas and Liebig, Julius Plücker and many more.

The editor and his assistants, and the Royal Institution, are to be congratulated on the publication of so much that is new and interesting.

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